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**Animals in the religion and culture of the Tibetan Plateau**

# Introduction

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# Introduction

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Geoffrey Barstow

1 This issue has its origins in a pair of conference panels, one at the 2014 meeting of the American Academy of Religion, and the other at the 2016 meeting of the International Association of Tibetan Studies[1]. These panels sought to bring together a diverse set of perspectives on the complex role that animals play in Tibetan religion and culture, a goal that is taken up by this issue of *Études mongoles & sibériennes, centrasiatiques & tibétaines*[2]. As it is elsewhere in the world, the relationship between humans and animals in Tibet is complex and informs human culture in a multiplicity of ways. Appropriately, then, the articles in this issue approach the place of animals in Tibetan culture from a wide variety of perspectives, ranging from the utilitarian to the symbolic to the moral. More than any single topic or theoretical approach, it is the diversity in the papers collected here that provides real insight into the complex tensions that surround humans' relationship with animals on the Tibetan Plateau.

2 To begin with, many Tibetans approached animals as a source of food. And yet, as Toni Huber's article on the division of game meat among hunters reveals, food is never just food: it is invested with broader social meaning. Hunting, as Huber presents it, was a group effort, and the game meat was divided according to well-established rules reflecting each participant's role in the hunt. It is at this point, Huber claims, that "wild animals properly enter the social world", with their remains used to maintain and create human relationships. The interconnection of food animals and human society is further emphasized in articles by Nancy Levine and Ga Errang, both of whom look at the relationship between nomads and their animals. As Levine demonstrates, the nomadic communities she worked in have a complex, multifaceted relationship with their animals, beyond simple questions of economic calculation. In particular, Levine notes the way in which families sought to offset the sinful nature of animal husbandry by setting aside a number of animals as "liberated lives" (*tshe thar*). In Levine's analysis, this practice reflects the complex relationship these nomads had with their animals, and the intersecting nature of their concerns. For his part, Ga Errang addresses the many reasons why contemporary nomads shift the composition of their herds, particularly their choice

to emphasize yak instead of sheep. He articulates the complexity of this decision, and particularly the socially embedded nature of which type of animal a family chooses to raise. Again, this is not a simple question of economic calculation, but also involves ideas about social opinion and religious ideals, particularly the anti-slaughter movement being promoted by religious leaders such as Khenpo Tsültrim Lodrö of Larung Gar.

3 But the utilization of animals did not end with their consumption. Among other uses, animal parts are widely employed in Tibetan medicine. In his contribution to this issue, Olaf Czaja discusses this practice, with a particular focus on eleven types of insect. Czaja elaborates on the medicinal properties of these insects, as well as the classificatory systems used by Tibetan and Mongolian doctors and the relationships between these systems and the Chinese and Indian medical traditions. Once again, animal products are revealed to be embedded in complex social networks.

4 Beyond their utilization as food and medicine, these papers reveal a strong concern with the symbolic use of animals, particularly in ritual. It is no surprise that animals were part of early Tibetan religious rituals, but Brandon Dotson's reflections on animal symbolism in early Tibetan dice divination opens up a fascinating new aspect of this society. As Dotson shows, these animals were understood as powerful "repositories of fortune", that a successful diviner could draw from in order to augment his own good fortune. Through successful divination, clients could absorb the "fortunate essence" of the wild into themselves and their livestock. These animals thus entered human society by facilitating the exchange of fortune between the wild and tame. The importance of animal symbols is continued in Petra Maurer's work, in which she analyzes the role of the tiger in Tibetan geomantic practices. In geomantic analysis, practitioners interpret the shape of geographical features in order to understand the ways in which those landforms will impact those who live there, so that landforms that resemble tigers are imbued with particular qualities. Further, Maurer demonstrates that the ideas found in Tibetan geomancy draw on ideas and practices found in Chinese *fengshui*. In Maurer's analysis, the tiger enters Tibetan society not only as a means of interpreting geographical features, but also as an object of exchange between the Tibetan and Chinese cultural spheres.

5 Arguably the the most significant question about animals in Tibetan ritual life, however, involves the issue of "red" offerings, a subject taken up by Marlene Erschbamer, Katia Buffetrille, and Daniel Berounský. In her contribution, Erschbamer notes that animal sacrifice is a traditional practice among Sikkimese shamans. In recent centuries, however, this practice has been critiqued by Buddhist lamas promoting a religious vision founded in the Buddhist ethical command to not kill. Drawing on the Sikkimese context, Erschbamer thus reveals and examines the fundamental tension between the perceived efficacy of animal sacrifice and Buddhist ethical norms. Buffetrille and Berounský continue this discussion of red offerings by analyzing a pair of specific rituals. In her work, Buffetrille explores a red smoke offering (*dmar bsang*) to the territorial deity Trike Yülha in Amdo. As she demonstrates, this blood offering ritual persists to the present, despite the fact that participants understand what they are doing to be in opposition to Buddhist norms. Further, Buffetrille reveals connections between Trike Yülha and the the Chinese divinities Guan Di and Wenchang. Once again, animals – in this case as ritual objects – are revealed as objects of cultural exchange. For his part, Daniel Berounský's article sheds light on a particular practice in which foxes are burned as a ritual offering. In addition to the details of the practice itself, Berounský delves into its cultural origins,

arguing that it carries strong connections with both Mongol practices and the Nyen collection of Bön texts.

6 In one way or another, most of these articles explore a basic tension in Tibetan attitudes towards animals. On the one hand, animals are to be utilized for economic or ritual ends. On the other hand, Buddhist ethics calls for animals to be respected and not harmed. In my own contribution to this issue, I explore this latter perspective, asking how much moral standing Tibetan religious leaders accorded to animals. Perhaps surprisingly, given the many ways in which animals were utilized in Tibetan culture, I argue that these religious leaders afforded them considerable moral standing. Animals did not, in this vision, rise to the moral status of humans, but, largely because of their assumed sentience and ability to suffer, humans should respect them and take their needs into account.

7 As a collection, these articles provide a multifaceted look at the relationships Tibetans had with the animals in their lives. This sheds light on Tibetan culture, of course, but it also relates to the growing theoretical literature on the role of animals in human culture and, particularly, religion. In thinking about this emerging body of literature, two works in particular are relevant to this collection: Aaron Gross' 2014 *The Question of the Animal and Religion. Theoretical Stakes and Practical Applications*[3] and Reiko Ohnuma's 2017 *Unfortunate Destiny. Animals in the Indian Buddhist Imagination*[4]. Over the next few paragraphs I will offer some preliminary reflections on how the articles in this issue intersect with these works.

8 Aaron Gross' *The Question of the Animal and Religion* remains the most thorough attempt to theorize the role of animals in religion that I am aware of. In it, Gross argues that animals in religious discourse serve as a site through which humans form their own self-identity as what Gross calls "humane subjects[5]". This sense of humans as humane subjects emerges out of a tension between competing understandings of the animal other. On the one hand, religious discourse clearly places humans in a position of ascendency over animals, justifying human use and exploitation of animals as a resource. On the other hand, he notes, these same discourses often suggest a kinship between humans and animals, based on shared vulnerability and mortality. These positions are in tension with each other, but it is a productive tension that ultimately shapes what it means to be human.

9 Gross' analysis is focused on Judaism, but it is clear that many of the articles in this collection reflect a similar tension between a sense of human ascendency over animals and a sense of kinship with them. This tension can be seen in the religious concerns over red offerings in the articles by Buffetrille, Erschbamer, and Berounský, as well as in the articles by Nancy Levine and Ga Errang, where nomads express a sense that their economic utilization of animals is justified as well as a recognition that the animals deserve some level of moral consideration. Further, the sense of kinship that Gross describes is based, at least in part, on a recognition of shared mortality between humans and animals. In my article on the moral standing of animals in Tibet, I argue that a shared sense of suffering, particularly the suffering of death, is key to the relatively high degree of moral standing that Tibetan Buddhist authors accord to animals. It is because animals suffer in ways that are reminiscent of our own suffering that their needs deserve to be taken into consideration.

10 While there is apparent overlap between Gross' work and the human/animal relationship described in the articles included here, however, there are also notable differences. In Gross' analysis, the Jewish community recognizes a kinship with animals, but there are

limits to that kinship and animals remain fundamentally other. In the Tibetan context, on the other hand, religious leaders frequently discuss the permeability of the human and animal worlds, often encourage students to think of animals as no different than their present mothers. This practice reflects a vision where the sense of kinship between human and animal is even stronger than Gross might anticipate. Thus, while we might see a tension between human ascendency over animals and human animal kinship in the interactions of Tibetan nomads with their animals or in the divisive practice of red offerings, this tension does not map perfectly onto the tension observed and described by Gross. While Gross' ideas about the formation of the humane subject provide an interesting lens through which to analyze the human/animal relationship in Tibet, therefore, that Tibetan relationship also provides a context through which to reflect on some of Gross' theories.

11 Reiko Ohnuma's *Unfortunate Destiny* is less explicitly theoretical than Gross, but also more geographically and culturally related to Tibet. Ohnuma takes on the task of making sense of the various roles that animals play in Indian Buddhist literature. Among the perspectives she elucidates is a basic tension between the creation of distance between humans and animals on the one hand and a sense that we share a fundamental identity with them as sentient beings on the other[6]. This tension – reminiscent though not identical to Gross' tension between human ascendency over animals while also being akin to them – forms the basic relationship between humans and animals in the Indian Buddhist literature Ohnuma analyzes. In her analysis, this tension finds expression in the discontinuity between the human and animal realms, the roles assumed by animals in jataka literature, and those animals that serve as doubles of the Buddha. Ohnuma's work is the most interesting and nuanced single work on animals in Buddhism that I am aware of, and it is no surprise that the articles in this volume intersect with it in various ways.

12 Perhaps most obviously, the basic tension that Ohnuma articulates is – like the tension Gross points to – very much in evidence in these papers. Most of the articles collected here, in fact, point to some aspect of this tension between visions in which humans are fundamentally distinct and superior to animals and in which we are fundamentally alike. Beyond this simple observation, however, what really makes Ohnuma's work interesting and relevant to readers of this present collection is the many ways in which her analysis differs from what we find here. For one thing, Ohnuma's analysis emphasizes the degree to which Indian Buddhists saw animals as inferior to humans. To be an animal was the "unfortunate destiny" to which her title refers. In my article in this collection, however, I argue that Tibetan religious leaders gave animals a surprisingly high degree of moral standing (surprising, at least, when seen in the light of Ohnuma and others' analysis of animals in Indic Buddhism). To be an animal was still understood to be an unfortunate destiny, but not quite as unfortunate as Indian Buddhists seem to have felt. While Ohnuma's basic tension is evidenced in Tibet, therefore, the context is nonetheless distinct.

13 Further, Ohnuma approaches her question with a fundamentally different methodology than any of the papers in this issue. Ohnuma, after all, is interested in Indian Buddhism and is, therefore, largely limited to literary sources. While the majority of the articles in this collection also make use of literary analysis to one degree or another, most also draw on ethnographic, art historical or other sources. Among other implications, these sources add a layer of complexity to our understanding of the human/animal relationship. This

directly illuminates the Tibetan context, but also points to areas in which future scholars could further Ohnuma's analysis of animals in the Indian Buddhist context as well.

14 This brief discussion of Aaron Gross and Reiko Ohnuma's work is not intended as a full, critical analysis of either author's work. Rather, my hope here is simply to point to a few of the many ways in which the articles present in this collection intersect with two of the most important recent works on animals and religion. As I hope this brief introduction has shown, the articles assembled here, both individually and as a collection, go a good way towards offering a complex vision of the place of animals in Tibetan religion and culture. By doing so they also offer a new perspective on some of the theoretical issues surrounding the place of animals in human culture more broadly.

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## NOTES

**1.** At the outset, I wish to thank and acknowledge the participants and respondents for these two panels, without whose contributions this issue would never have come to pass.
**2.** To the best of my knowledge, the only work with a similar focus is *Wildlife and Plants in Traditional and Modern Tibet*, a volume of articles edited by Alessandro Boesi and Francesca Cardi in 2005.
**3.** Gross 2014.
**4.** Ohnuma 2017.
**5.** Gross 2014, pp. 151-152.
**6.** Ohnuma 2017, p. xv.